

# Same Old Dog, New Tricks: Lesson Planning as Friend Not Foe

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*By David Propst*

Writing lesson plans is an integral part of teaching. Unfortunately, too many beginning teachers and teachers in training consider writing lesson plans a tiresome and unnecessary chore with which they will quickly dispense once out from under the watchful eyes of their supervisors. And once in the "real world" in their own classrooms, they resort to this horrible chore only when they know their lessons will be observed.

Perhaps this negative image of lesson planning is the fault of teachers, professors, and teacher trainers the world over who give trainees a simple lesson plan format with one or two examples and then require that the trainees produce a certain number of their own plans in order to pass a course. Instead of being presented as a heuristic, as an aid in times of preparatory trouble, lesson planning is presented as a requirement, a loathsome task that "real teachers" do not bother with anyway.

In my experience working with teacher trainees, I have noticed that their frustrations with lesson planning usually stem from three main sources. First, they do not understand why lesson planning is necessary and exactly how it can help them; the purpose and rationale behind it are not adequately explained and discussed. Second, there is often no consensus among the trainees (nor among the trainers, for that matter) about what constitutes an objective and how to write one. Third, the trainees find the lesson plan forms they are given too vague and of little help in preparing a lesson. In other words, first they decide what they want to do in class and then struggle to make their ideas fit the format rather than letting the format serve as a guide.

While working with a group of Peace Corps volunteers in Poland, I found that they felt the same frustrations as those mentioned above. In an effort to clarify the role of lesson planning in teaching and to counteract these frustrations, I designed a lesson planning instrument that I will present in this article. This instrument can be used by teacher trainers in a workshop setting to introduce trainees to lesson planning or by teachers who are looking for a change of pace.

The instrument consists of three main parts: 1) a list of benefits derived from lesson planning, 2) a lesson plan form with space for objectives and an outline of the lesson, and 3) a set of questions to consider about the objectives, the structure of the lesson and the lesson after it is presented (See Figure 1 , Figure 2 , Figure 3 , Figure 4 , Figure 5 , Figure 6 below)

The first part of this instrument (Figure 1), the list of benefits, is by no means exhaustive. The items on this list are self-explanatory, so I will not elaborate on them here, but they do provide a good starting point for a discussion on the merits of lesson planning. In a training program, it is important for trainees to understand these benefits and to be encouraged to add their own to the list. Lesson planning should be presented as a creative, imaginative, and ongoing process that helps teachers become more professional and better at their jobs.

Next we move to the lesson plan form (Figure 2). There is nothing innovative or new about this form. It resembles others in that it elicits from the teacher basic information such as date, materials needed, lesson objectives, an outline of the lesson, etc. In that regard, it is indeed a familiar "old dog." But I have included a variety of categories under the heading of objectives. As mentioned above, trainees and trainers often have a hard time deciding on exactly what an objective is. Many trainers teach trainees to write "performance" or "measurable" objectives, i.e., objectives that can be stated: "The student will be able to.." The problem with teaching only this type is that there are many worthy objectives that cannot be stated in these terms (e.g., "the students will speak English during the entire class period," which could be considered an "aim"). And there are still other objectives which simply do not need to be stated in those terms (e.g., structures and functions that will be covered during the lesson).

The trainees, therefore, become frustrated because they spend a good portion of their time trying to figure out how to put all of their objectives into these terms, often analogous to trying to fit square pegs into round holes. By broadening our concept of objectives, we free the trainee to look at the lesson from different angles. And once some of the other types of objectives have been identified, the trainee is more likely to write good performance objectives. (Here it should be noted that rarely would one be able to list objectives in each of the categories on this form for a single lesson. Indeed, a lesson might include only one of these types.)

A set of questions about lesson objectives (Figure 3) helps the teacher determine exactly what they should be. There is no one starting place; rather, the questions can be used to help guide a teacher who already has an idea or two in mind. For example, if a teacher knows that the lesson will include a certain function (e.g., giving directions), then s/he can fill in the function category on the objective sheet and then look at the questions regarding functions to help him/her decide about other aspects of the lesson. Using these questions, s/he might then decide on an appropriate situation and structures to teach. Then s/he can fill in those sections on the objective sheet, look at the questions regarding them, and identify more objectives of different types. These questions will also help the teacher in planning the structure of the lesson, which we turn to next.

I have divided the lesson into five main phases (Figure 4). I decided on these phases based on lesson plan formats I have used in the past, ideas culled from various sources and classroom experience. There is nothing sacred about this format, but I believe that it represents a solid ESL/EFL lesson. Beginning teachers are often taught that they must include all of the phases identified on the lesson planning format in each lesson. This causes frustration because it is not always possible (or advisable) and results in artificial lessons. One must keep in mind that all five of these phases (or the phases in any lesson planning format) do not always need to be completed in every single lesson. One lesson, for example, might begin with "preparation" and end with "communicative practice" with the next lesson devoted to "evaluation" and "follow-up," or any other combination.

As with the lesson objectives, a list of questions regarding the structure of the lesson helps the teacher to consider carefully each phase of the lesson (See Figure 5). While these questions might seem obvious, the old adage that some things are obvious only after they are pointed out holds true here. Sometimes a teacher has a great activity that can be used during the

"communicative practice" phase but forgets to consider how the students need to be prepared to handle the activity and how to evaluate them afterwards. These questions help the teacher to consider all angles before s/he enters the classroom.

The final part of the instrument is a list of questions for the teacher to consider after the lesson (See Figure 6). Teachers, especially those starting out, should be encouraged to keep a journal in which they record their successes and failures in the classroom. If teachers do not reflect on what they did, they will continue to repeat the same mistakes or will fail to see what made a particular lesson excellent.

There is nothing revolutionary about this lesson planning instrument. As the title suggests, it simply serves to put a new slant on an age-old process. In my sessions, I found that it helped to clarify the reasons for lesson planning, helped the trainees to write better objectives, effectively guided them through the lesson planning process and helped to foster a more positive view of lesson planning. Like everything in teaching, this is a work in progress, and I would welcome any criticism, comments, or discussion about these ideas.

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## Figure 1

### Lesson planning will:

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| 1.  | focus you  |
| 2.  | provide you with a plan and a backup plan  |
| 3.  | force you to consider the purpose of the lesson and reason for each step             |
| 4.  | establish clear goals for the lesson that are understood by both you and the learner |
| 5.  | establish clear goals for the lesson that are understood by both you and the learner |
| 6.  | help you design a coherent and cohesive lesson                                       |
| 7.  | help you make a smooth transition from one lesson to the next                        |
| 8.  | provide you with a written record of the course                                      |
| 9.  | encourage you to examine the lessons critically and make improvements                |
| 10. | <i>add your own.</i>   |

**Figure 2**

**Lesson Plan Form:**

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| Course:  | Date: |
| Teacher:   | Time: |
| Recent information covered:                        |       |
| Materials needed:                                  |       |
| <b>OBJECTIVES</b>                                  |       |
| Theme/Topic  |       |
| Aims   |       |
| Skills   |       |
| Vocabulary   |       |
| Structures   |       |
| Functions  |       |
| Phonetics  |       |
| Learner training                                   |       |
| Affective  |       |
| Performance<br>behavior<br>conditions<br>standards |       |
| Other  |       |

**Figure 3**

**Questions to Answer about Lesson Objectives:**

|                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Theme/Topic/<br>Situation(s) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Why have I chosen this topic? Was it dictated by the text?</li><li>2. Is it of interest to the students?</li><li>3. How can I personalize the material (i.e., make it relevant to the students)?</li><li>4. What is the best way to present this topic initially (e.g., reading, pictures, music, etc.)?</li><li>5. Does this topic suggest certain situations?</li></ol> |
| Aims                         | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What is the general purpose of this lesson?</li><li>2. What do I want to encourage the</li></ol>  |

|            |  |
|------------|--|
|            | <p>students to do?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What do I want the students to get out of this?</li> </ol>   |
| Skills     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the topic of this lesson suggest a particular skill(s) which should be focused on?</li> <li>Does the material I have chosen to use in class pre-determine a particular skill(s)?</li> <li>For which skills do native speakers use the structures and functions presented in this lesson?</li> <li>How can (should) I integrate all four skills in this lesson?</li> </ol>                                |
| Vocabulary | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there any new/unfamiliar vocabulary in the material?</li> <li>Are there any idioms suggested by the topic/situation(s) chosen?</li> <li>What is the best way to present the vocabulary items (e.g., cloze test, quiz, pictures, etc.)?</li> <li>How can I get the students to practice using this new vocabulary?</li> <li>In what "real life" situations does one find these vocabulary items?</li> </ol> |
| Structures | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What structure(s) would a native speaker use in this context?</li> <li>How can I present this structure(s) in context?</li> <li>What are some functions commonly performed using this structure(s)?</li> <li>Do the students already know the structure(s)?</li> </ol>  |
| Functions  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What structure(s) is used to perform this function(s)?</li> <li>What skill(s) is suggested by this function(s)?</li> <li>In what situations do native speakers use this function(s)?</li> <li>What activities would allow students to use this function(s) in a communicative way and for a real</li> </ol>   |

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
|                  | <p>purpose?</p> <p>5. Are there any topics suggested by this function?</p>  |
| Phonetics        | <p>1. Are there any phonetic aspects of the structures that should be addressed (e.g., "what do you do?" becomes hatdyado?)?</p> <p>2. Any differences between American and British English?</p>  |
| Learner Training | <p>1. Are there any skills, apart from language, that I can train my students in (e.g., note-taking, outlining, study skills, self-evaluation, etc.)?</p> <p>2. Can I help my students find out more about their personal learning styles?</p> <p>3. How can I help my students improve their learning?</p>   |
| Affective        | <p>1. What type of atmosphere do I want to create and what is the best way of doing this?</p> <p>2. How can I help the students feel comfortable?</p> <p>3. Can (should) the students have fun with the activities I have planned?</p>  |
| Performance      | <p>1. What do I want the students to be able to do at the end of the lesson?</p> <p>2. How can I determine if this is accomplished (i.e., how can I evaluate their performance)?</p> <p>3. Under what conditions will I evaluate their performance (e.g., role-play, test, etc.)?</p> <p>4. What standards will I use to evaluate the students?</p> |

**Figure 4**

**Lesson Structure:**

| Phase                                   | Time | Activity | Grouping | Comments |
|---|------|----------|----------|----------|
| Preparation                             |      |          |          |          |
| Presentation                            |      |          |          |          |
| Communicative Practice                  |      |          |          |          |
| Evaluation                              |      |          |          |          |
| Follow-up                               |      |          |          |          |
| What potential problems can I identify? |      |          |          |          |
| What can I do about them?               |      |          |          |          |

**Figure 5****Questions to Answer about Lesson Structure:**

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Preparation  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What is the best way to introduce the topic?</li><li>2. How can I get the students interested in the topic?</li><li>3. How much time should I spend on this phase?</li><li>4. How can I get the students to contribute to this part of the lesson?</li><li>5. Can I use the students' previous knowledge or prediction abilities?</li></ol>   |
| Presentation | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Does my presentation depend on the materials I have (e.g., a song, textbook, travel brochure, newspaper, etc.)?</li><li>2. What do my students need to know in order to perform the tasks I have set for them?</li><li>3. What is the best way to present this?</li><li>4. How can I make the students actively participate in this phase?</li><li>5. What can I elicit from the students and what do I need to "teach"?</li><li>6. Do I need to review/preview</li></ol> |

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
|                        | <p>vocabulary?</p> <p>7. Will they be working with structures of functions they don't know?</p>   |
| Communicative Practice | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Are the tasks, activities, and/or experiences I have chosen based on what was pre- sented in the previous phase?</li> <li>2. Are the tasks communicative? Are they learner-centered?</li> <li>3. What should my role as teacher be during this phase (e.g., facilitator, resource, participant, etc.)?</li> <li>4. What types of activities would work best here (e.g., information-gap, jigsaw, interview, etc.)?</li> <li>5. What sort of classroom arrangement would best fit the learning experiences I have chosen (e.g., discussion circle, small groups, etc.)?</li> </ol> |
| Evaluation             | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How can I best determine if the students have learned what I wanted them to?</li> <li>2. Is this part of my lesson student-centered?</li> <li>3. What is the best way to arrange the class for this phase?</li> <li>4. Can I help the students learn to evaluate themselves?</li> <li>5. What types of learning experiences would be best for this phase of the lesson (e.g., a general discussion, student presentations, group projects, role- plays, etc.)?</li> </ol>   |
| Follow-up              | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What can I have the students do that will reinforce what they have learned in this lesson?</li> <li>2. Should this be done as homework or in class (maybe for the next lesson)?</li> </ol>  |



## Figure 6

### Reflecting on the Lesson:

What was the best thing about the lesson?

What did I enjoy most? What did the students enjoy most?

How did the students react? Why?

What would I change about the lesson if I used it again?

At what points in the lesson could I have engaged the students more? How?

Were the students able to do what I wanted them to do?

Why/why not?

*Add your own questions.*